

## Nursery under scrutiny over mystery pistachio ailment

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The pistachio industry is concerned about a mystery ailment affecting young trees propagated as clones by Duarte Nursery near Modesto. Scientists say bacteria found its way into clonal-propagated pistachio tree rootstock from Duarte Nursery, one of the largest tree nurseries in California.

Some young trees sold to farmers in California and Arizona from 2011 to 2014 exhibit what has been called Bushy Top Syndrome, affecting 20,000 acres and perhaps 2 million trees, according to an estimate by Robert Klein, manager of the Fresno-based California Pistachio Research Board.

The affected trees exhibit short stature, stunted growth in the limbs and roots with a bushy top somewhat like a witches broom, Klein said.

The trees are weak and can be pulled up easily from the ground. Most cannot be successfully budded.

Farm advisors have recognized there is a problem with the trees for some time, although the cause is not known, and no mention of Duarte as the source has been made public before.

John Duarte, owner of Stanislaus County-based Duarte Nursery — the only nursery implicated in the find — said he is not convinced this is a disease. “If it is, it’s the strangest disease I’ve ever seen,” he said.

Whatever is making this happen, growers are pulling trees by the thousands, wondering if getting rid of the trees will end the problem.

To make matters more complicated, not all the Duarte-delivered clones exhibit severe symptoms, said Klein, making it more difficult to replant. If the problem is bacteria-based, there is also concern about spread of the disease either from the soil or farm implements.

“It’s a big can of worms,” said Kings County pistachio grower Chuck Nichols, who added he has 300 acres of trees that exhibit “significant bushy top symptoms.”

Nichols said Duarte Nursery notified him more than a year ago that the trees had a problem, but no compensation was agreed to, he said. He added trees he bought from Duarte in 2007, 2008 and 2010 do not have symptoms.

Of the 300 acres affected, Nichols said he has pulled out about 75 acres.

With uncertainty about what to do about the rest of the acreage, Nichols sent out an “open letter” to pistachio growers earlier this month to see if others would join him to discuss “options” that may or may not include a lawsuit.

“I’ve heard back from four,” he said. Nichols added he is aware of six lawsuits pending on the issue.

Duarte Nursery is a big player in the pistachio industry, enjoying an estimated 70-percent market share for new trees, by Nichols’ estimate.

Now owner John Duarte said because of the problem, the nursery has suspended its clonal pistachio sales for 2015 “until we can figure out what is going on.”

Duarte has suspected the problem is a “genetic disorder” rather than a disease, although he admits there are “still a lot of questions.”

If this is a disease, “it’s new and unprecedented,” he said. This bacterium, never found in pistachios before, “is usually found in moist environments,” not in a dry climate like ours, he added.

“Of course we are surprised,” Duarte said. “But after all, this is farming. There is uncertainty.”

As to the issue of compensation, Duarte insists he is “working with growers,” but the contracts that were signed included “limited liability” protection for the company.

“There are a number of growers we have signed settlement agreements with, and there are a handful who went out and got attorneys,” he said.

The clonal produced trees developed by the University of California have become a favorite of the industry in recent years.

Nichols said he does not believe how the trees were propagated, as clones, makes them susceptible, but he has no idea how the bacteria infected this rootstock.

“It could have been spread by anything from water to bad luck,” Nichols said.

Klein said Duarte plantings can vary from 75 percent with symptoms to as low as 5 percent. He adds there is no reliable diagnostic test for growers to determine if a tree is affected, putting farmers in a tough position.

Nichols said growers like himself are waiting to decide when to pull trees, whole groves or piecemeal, given it will take several years to make up for lost production.

Because of surging overseas demand in recent years, the pistachio industry in California has expanded rapidly, planting thousands of new acres.

Now a series of setbacks may ratchet back production.

Besides the mystery problem, there is the drought and a continuing lack of chill hours this winter, adding up to lower production estimates despite all the new orchards coming online. Confusion reigns if there will be an “on or off” year in this crop’s alternate bearing pattern.

Last year the state produced about 500 million tons.

Klein said this year, “we could see anywhere from 300 to 700 million tons.”

Then there are other factors.

Last year for the first time, China went to Iran to buy pistachios in search of a better price. Importers did buy some U.S.-grown pistachios, but not as much. Then there is the strong dollar that makes U.S. goods more expensive in other countries.

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